

Addressing the Issue of Disadvantaged Youth Seeking Work

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1 Introduction

Since the economic downturn began in the United Kingdom (UK) in 2008, youth unemployment has risen and become increasingly significant for government policy. A number of reasons can be identified for the increase in youth unemployment including: the general contraction of the economy and labour market; reluctance of employers to take on new employees, especially young people who are perceived as lacking the necessary skills and experience (although these are often not seen as equating to qualifications, which young people have more of compared to older generations); the relatively high numbers of young people previously working in badly affected sectors such as construction and retail and more recently the public sector; and the overall increase in competition for a decreasing number of jobs (McQuaid et al. 2010). The National Employers Skill Survey in England (UKCES, 2010) found that a third (29%) of employers interviewed felt that 16 year old school leavers were poorly prepared for work. Issues included, a lack of experience of work/life, poor attitude, personality or lack of motivation, as opposed to any technical skills. Similar findings are also evident at a Scottish level where employers consider that school leavers have a lack of preparedness this is commonly attributed with ‘a lack of understanding of what working life entails and a poor attitude towards work characterised by frequent absence, poor timekeeping, a perceived lack of responsibility to their employer and a poor attitude to career development and training’ (Futureskills Scotland, 2008: 58). These factors present problems for all young people trying to take the first steps in the labour market but often it is those young people who are most vulnerable or disadvantaged that do not make successful transitions.

The issue of disengagement from the labour market is not new. Even in the context of the better economic conditions in the early 2000s a significant number of young people entered into negative destinations (such as unemployment); and it is often those young people who are most vulnerable or disadvantaged (e.g. those who lack qualifications, those with social, emotional or behavioural difficulties, and those living in poverty) that do not make successful transitions (Scottish Government 2009; Bynner & Parsons 2002). Unemployment can have a long lasting impact on a young person’s future career prospects and earnings potential. Those who have been unemployed in their youth experience long-term negative impacts on their career development, earnings, wellbeing and health (Hammarström & Janlert 2002; Bell & Blanchflower 2011; Dieckhoff, 2011). These effects can be felt for many years with individuals experiencing the ‘scar of youth unemployment’ when they are in their 40s (Gregg & Tominey 2004). Further, it has been argued that young people, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds, can become trapped in ‘poor quality jobs’ or ‘poor quality work’ throughout adulthood (Green & Owen 2006; MacDonald 2011).

The organisations examined for the two case studies sit within the wider UK unemployment and employability policy context. At a general level, for all age groups, the UK policy on

unemployment and employability in recent decades has been driven by the view that work remains the best route out of poverty for most people. The focus of the previous Labour administration (1997-2010) was on dealing with poverty through work, in particular, by promoting supply side measures through skills development with focus on a 'work first' approach to employment activation policy (DWP 2007; Lindsay, McQuaid, Dutton 2007). However, even with the economic downturn and the change in UK government there has not been a major shift in policy as employment remains a key goal, rather than other forms of activity such as caring or voluntary work (HM Government 2010). These centralised and top-down approaches focus on placing individuals in work rather than promoting individuals' capabilities to choose the work that they have reason to value, denying individuals and communities the voice and autonomy to make choices and shape futures (for further information about the policy and institutional context of the UK case study see McQuaid and Hollywood 2012).

This paper focuses on disadvantaged young people, aged 16-25 years, making the transition from unemployment to employment. It examines how two Third sector developed and operated programmes in Scotland (*Barnardo's Works* run by Barnardo's and *Get Into* run by the Prince's Trust) attempt to enhance young peoples' capabilities for work, voice and education; and partly move away from 'work-first' approaches to employment activation. These programmes, although focused on getting young people into employment, are more than job placement schemes as they seek to address those wider issues that prevent many young people entering and progressing in work such as confidence, lack of aspirations, lack of work experience, in addition to issues such as health and housing. We argue that in many ways these programmes can be seen as focusing on promoting the individual capabilities of disadvantaged, unemployed youth to choose the work that they have reason to value.

The remainder of this paper outlines the details of two case studies of programmes; the research methods used; the empirical results from the two case studies; an analytical review of the results; and the main conclusions to come out of the research.

2 Background To Case Studies And Research Methods

2.1 Case studies

The focus of the research was on two national Third sector organisations operating in Scotland:

Barnardo's Works (run by the children's charity Barnardo's: www.barnardos.org.uk/) provides supported employment for disadvantaged young people (in terms of living in disadvantaged areas, being long term unemployment, lacking skills and experience, lacking qualifications, experiencing low self confidence, substance misuse, homelessness etc.), aged 16-24 years, and is delivered across urban, semi-rural, and rural areas. The voluntary programme lasts six months and provides an induction period followed by supported work placement with an employer. Generally in the first half of the programme there is no wage cost to the employer and in the last half *Barnardo's Works* supports half the wage cost and the employer pays the other half. The programme offers placements in a variety of sectors although some localities specialise in certain sectors. Aftercare is offered to all young people leaving the programme and some choose to take it up. Funding of the programme varies in each locality but in the main comes from European Commission funding, national government employment programmes, local authorities and charitable trusts etc.

Get Into (run by national youth charity, Prince's Trust: www.princes-trust.org.uk/) is a voluntary programme that offers intensive training and work experience in specific sectors (e.g. retailing) to those aged 16-25 years who are unemployed. Courses are run throughout the year in different areas with approximately 15 people accepted on each course. The length and structure of the courses varies by sector, with course length ranging from five to ten weeks. External providers deliver some of the training. Optional six month progression support provided by volunteers is currently being piloted in some areas. Funding varies between programmes but in the main also come from European Commission funding, local authorities and charitable trusts and funds etc.

2.2 Research questions

In the context of our case study we used the Capability Approach to analyse the degree to which the programmes gave the young people the capability to 'lead a life they have reason to value' and provided them with the capability for voice, work and education.

The research questions that the two case studies sought to address were constructed around the four inter-related factors seen, in the context of this research, as contributing to a young person's capabilities for work: resources; empowerment; individual conversion factors; and external conversion factors. The Capability Approach was used to analyse the degree to which the programmes gave the young people the capability to 'lead a life they have reason to value'. The main research questions we addresses were:

- Which conversion factors and capabilities does the programme seek to enhance?
- Are sufficient resources available to young people to enhance capabilities?
- Which factors facilitate the conversion of resources into capabilities?
- How are resources translated into capabilities?
- Which factors play an important role in the transition from unemployment to employment?
- What capabilities can be developed by the programme? And how are these capabilities enhanced by the programme?
- How are young people best supported in developing their capability for work?
- How do external factors impact on the availability of resources, commodities or opportunities?
- Have the young people been sufficiently empowered to have autonomy and a voice in the delivery, implementation and evaluation of the programme?

2.3 Research Methods

A qualitative research methodology was adopted. This involved semi-structured interviews with managers, project workers and young people in the two case study organisations.

Interviews were conducted across the five different *Barnardo's Works* regional offices with sixteen staff members (service managers, project workers and employer liaison officers). Two

representatives from the programme's head office were also interviewed. Twenty-two young people (sixteen young men and six young women) aged between 16 and 25 years were interviewed. These young people were all at different stages of the programme: 12 were on the induction phase, six on their work placement and four had finished the programme.

Fewer interviews were conducted with stakeholders on *Get Into*, reflecting the lower staffing levels and the difficulty of arranging interviews with young people who are on much shorter programmes. Four project workers and one representative from the programme's head office were interviewed. Five young people were interviewed both in their first week on the programme and then on completion. Three were female and two male, aged between 17 and 20 years,

Verbal consent was taken from all of the participants who were told that they could withdraw from the interview/research at any point. An interview guide was used to ensure that key areas were addressed but interviewees were free to expand on issues important to them. The interviews were audio-recorded where participants gave permission, or detailed notes were taken. All the audio-recordings were transcribed verbatim.

A 'thematic content analysis' approach was taken to analyse the transcripts (Green & Thorogood 2004) using an analysis framework loosely based on Strauss and Corbin's (1998) Grounded Theory approach. It is recognised that due to having an initial theoretical framework (the Capability Approach) we were not able to build theory exactly in line with the approach outlined by Strauss and Corbin, however our analysis of the interview data used their broad approach to grounding theory building in the data. The research questions were then applied as a means of further analysing the data to understand how the programmes can be understood from a capabilities perspective e.g. do the programmes enable disadvantaged young people to live the life they have reason to value.

3 Empirical Findings

This section examines the empirical findings (using the perspectives of both programme staff and young people) from the two case studies addressing three core areas (programme aims; how the programmes provide young people with the capabilities for voice, work and education; and the programme outcomes in terms of capabilities for voice, work and education) as well as sub-themes, specific to the individual case studies, within these core areas.

3.1 General findings – Barnardo's Works

3.1.1 Programme Aims

The overall aim of *Barnardo's Works* is to help disadvantaged young people, aged 16-24 years, to gain access to employment. The programme is aimed at those young people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds and areas and works with "*young people who wouldn't have the opportunity elsewhere*" (Service manager). It gives disadvantaged young people paid work experience (some of the 'pay' may be in the form of certain welfare benefits initially, but later it is pay from the employer and/or Barnardo's Works).

While working with the most disadvantaged young people the staff participants also spoke of the need to work with those who were seen as being ready to be on the programme and those who would benefit most from the opportunity offered by the programme. Young people needed to be able to cope with work, i.e. be 'job ready', otherwise it was seen that the

programme would be 'setting the young people up to fail'. However 'job readiness' as defined by *Barnardo's Works* was at a much lower level than the definitions used in other employability programmes.

"We have also got to assess, people call it 'job ready' we call it not necessarily as job ready as other people would see but enough there to work with. We wouldn't want to set them up to fail if their problems were so bad we wouldn't be able to get them into a proper work routine" (Project worker)

Core to the approach taken on the programme is not only achieving hard outcomes such as employment and qualifications, but also addressing those soft outcomes such as self-confidence and self-belief, which were seen by the project workers as important conversion factors for ensuring future sustainable employment. The staff participants identified some of the conversion factors that the young people lacked. Our analysis indicated that these could be seen as those individual and external conversion factors that impact on a young person's capability for work. The staff stressed that it was hard to identify 'typical' barriers as many young people faced multiple issues; although there were some common and often deep rooted issues faced by the young people: lack of family/peer encouragement; lack of role models; long term unemployment; lack of confidence; substance misuse and youth offending background; lack of advice from school. The staff reported that some young people were reluctant to inform staff about certain barriers, especially at the beginning of the programme, although the young people often disclosed more information as they got to know the staff better. Only one question in the questionnaire used by the researchers was directly related to the young people's barriers (Has anything outside work made it difficult for you to take part in the programme?) and the majority of the young people responded that there was nothing. It became clear during the interviews that the young people did not always want to talk about all the barriers they faced with the researchers although most mentioned a lack of qualifications, experience and self-confidence through the discussions about their experiences before and on the programme. As such it is recognised that there may be other barriers that our interviews and analysis were not able to identify.

In addressing the lack of conversion factors for work, the programme supports young people in all aspects of their lives, and not just addressing issues of employment/unemployment in isolation of the wider contexts of young people's lives. It is perceived that this approach is necessary in order to give young people a realistic chance at finding employment. This can be seen as very much in line with the Capability Approach, which acknowledges that individuals are socially and culturally situated and embedded; and that this shapes what they are able to do and to be.

"We have to have the conversation that probably yeah you could [do the] job but you're not going to keep it because there is all this stuff happening in your life. So let's sort out the stuff in your life and then get a job...the jobs is what happens when everything else is in place really" (Service manager)

The type of support offered to young people therefore goes beyond providing training to enable them to do certain types of work or achieve other hard outcomes (such as gaining qualifications). The programme staff spoke of the support they provided with often taken-for-granted individual and external conversion factors (e.g. helping young people to wake-up in

the morning, helping pay for travel, planning travel routes to work, attending health care appointments) that were central in enabling young people to attend their work placements. As such, from a Capability Approach perspective the programme unpacks the difference between outcomes and functionings, by taking an approach that recognises that focusing solely on the job outcome fails to adequately take account of the process that leads to that functioning.

3.1.2 Providing Young People with the Capabilities for Voice, Work and Education

Providing young people with the capabilities for voice, work and education were identified in the case studies as being much more than helping them get qualifications or placing them in work placements. Other factors such as support, encouragement, advice, supportive employers, building aspirations and managing expectations were identified as key elements in enabling young people to have the capabilities for voice, work and education. In addition there was considerable support for the young people after they had started work experience (i.e. considerable ‘aftercare’ was provided during and after their work experience).

A lack of support and encouragement (i.e. supportive social networks) was one of the potential resources, and arguably individual conversion factors, that the young people could lack. One staff member outlined how *“if they’ve got positive influences from their family and their peer group of friends that also encourages them to do well in the workplace”* (Employer liaison officer). Some of the young people also outlined the important role that their families and friends had made in encouraging them to engage in the programme and addressing some of the barriers that may arise during the transitions from unemployment to work.

“My mum is helping me out because it is a big jump from 2 weeks to a monthly pay, which is understandable, which if my mum is helping me out that is a good thing” (Young male)

However in many cases the programme workers offered support and encouragement to the young people that were not necessarily available elsewhere (so enhancing personal conversion factors). This encouragement could take many forms including simply contacting the young person at the end of the working day to see how their day had been.

“Just coming in at the end of the day, if there’s not somebody to ask them how was your day, we’ll give them a call at the end of the day and ask how things have gone” (Project worker)

The staff stressed that: employers needed to: offer a nurturing environment; buy into *Barnardo’s Works’s* ethos (while also realising that employers needed to prioritise business demands); be aware that the young people faced barriers; and be aware that the programme was a learning process for the young people and therefore they were *“not going to get a polished article from day one”* (Employer liaison officer). Many of the young people spoke of the importance for them to be in friendly workplaces.

Central to the Capability Approach is having the freedom to do what is considered valuable. The programme provides a supportive environment where young people can find out what they want to do. The Capability Approach puts a great emphasis on freedom and choice, but often young people do not know what they want to do with some young people citing that they had been *“changing [their] mind a lot for a long time”* (Young male). One of the important aspects of the programme is that it helped young people identify what they wanted to do and to form aspirations for the future. Through the programme young people were

encouraged to think about what kind of work placements they went on; which in some cases was a new experience for them.

“it’s quite refreshing to have somewhere where you can sit down and you can think about what you actually want to do and what you can do and what you can’t do” (Young male)

While the young people were given choice in the placements they engaged with, the programme staff were also keen to challenge some of the young people’s aspirations by questioning them about their motivations etc. in order to broaden their horizons. It was felt that the aspirations that the young people had were often very narrow, shaped by a lack of exposure to the world of work (e.g. living in second or third generation workless families or only knowing people working in a limited range of occupations) and as a result the young people did not realise the range of options open to them.

“...It’s the important part about helping young people understand how little they know about what their potential options are. That’s one of the first stages” (Head office manager)

The gendered nature of the aspirations of the young people was cited by some of the staff, with the young women often only wanting to work in traditionally female occupations and young men often only wanting to work in traditionally male occupations.

“They tend to go for a lot of the traditional things, so boys construction and girls will say you know hairdressing or carer; they go for very traditional routes” (Employer liaison officer)

While giving young people choice in the placements they engaged with, it must be remembered that the programme operates in the wider labour market context and therefore there were constraints, because of these external conversion factors, in the choices young people had. Programme staff spoke of having to manage the expectations of the young people in terms of the labour market situation as well as expectations of what it is like to work (e.g. having to work their way up to positions where they would have greater control or responsibility).

“We work with aspirations and we always make clear with the young people that we’re not miracle workers. If you say that you want a job doing this and that job isn’t there we’ll be honest” (Service manager)

However, project workers also thought laterally to help young people achieve their aspirations framing a placement as a first step for the young people to achieve their aspirations in the future.

3.1.3 The Capability for Voice, Work and Education

Many of the young people on the programme lack work experience and therefore do not understand what paid employment entails, so the programme aims to provide young people with ‘work education’ so that they understand the norms of the workplace, what employers will expect from them as an employee, how to deal with issues in the workplace, and how to independently fill in application forms and write CVs. One of the staff participants outlined that the provision of this work education was enabled by making the work placements ‘as realistic as possible’ e.g. with young people working full-time and being treated like other employees.

“...what we don’t do is tasters; we don’t say...work for a week and see how you like it. The young person starts work, they’re at work, they’re working 37 to 40 hours and that’s it, and they’re treated as an employee” (Service manager)

Providing a ‘realistic’ experience of work was not without problems as other employees in the workplace would be aware that the young people were there as part of an employment programme. However, both youth people and staff participants reported that they were made to feel welcome in the workplace and did not feel that they were treated differently. , ‘Realistic’ experience could mean that young people might not have a voice in their working conditions as in the early stages of the placement they may have felt unable, or did not have the knowledge, to question or discuss practices they felt disadvantaged them, but this was unclear from the interviews. Another important difference in respect of a ‘realistic’ experience of work is that in the first half of the placement the young people are only paid (welfare) benefits and are only paid the employer’s wage in the second half. It was argued by the organisation that this arrangement made it easier to get employers involved and encouraged them to take a risk with young people they might not have otherwise considered. It was also outlined that where possible the employers would keep the young person on at the end of the placement, although this was becoming less common due to the economic downturn.

The programme often works with young people from families where there may have been generations of worklessness. Therefore the work education also helps young people see the value of work. Some of the young people mentioned and appeared to value the rewards they had experienced as a result of working e.g. having more money to socialise and having a routine, purpose and structure to their day.

“I’ve got things to look forward to now sort of thing and I’ve got a routine of doing things now. Before it was just waking up and doing nothing. I wouldn’t go back to it” (Young female)

3.2 General Findings - Get Into

3.2.1 Programme Aims

The aim of *Get Into* is to support disadvantaged young people, aged 16-24 years, who face barriers to employment to gain experience and qualifications in a specific sector. The young people that the programme works with are those who would not have the skills, experience or qualifications to find employment that they have reason to value without some support. Young people on unemployment benefits can normally continue to receive these while on *Get Into* and the programme also covers some expenses such as travel costs. As with *Barnardo’s Works*, core to the approach is that in order to effectively support the young people into employment there is a need to develop those individual and external conversion factors that may help young people achieve sustainable employment. Young people that the programme worked with were cited as often having: negative experiences of school; a lack of self-belief; a lack of encouragement from family and peers; a lack of careers advice from school; and a lack of (sustainable) job opportunities. This recognises that it is not only outcomes that are important (e.g. getting a job) but there is also a need to recognise the important role that factors such as health, well-being, family or education play in influencing outcomes.

Get Into gives young people skills, training and experience in order to enable them to work in particular sectors. The programme does not give young people jobs but provides them with the resources to find employment. It also enables young people to choose a job that they have

reason to value by providing them with “*a safe environment to...make that decision. Is [the job] for them?*” (Project worker). The sectors addressed by the programme are those identified to be of interest to young people but also sectors where there are jobs available. The programme therefore acknowledges the importance of external conversion factors e.g. labour market factors, recruitment factors and employment policy factors, in young people’s unemployment/employment experiences; as well as the way in which these impose restrictions on the choices that young people can make.

“It drives everything that we do these external factors – whether the jobs are there, what sector the jobs are in” (Project worker)

The external labour market situation was also seen as having an effect on the demand for the programme, one project worker outlined that they were increasing “*programme sizes because [they had] more young people...asking for help*” (Project worker). The type of young people wanting to engage with the programme was also changing because of rising youth unemployment.

“We work with a range of client groups, from hardest to reach to those who have been marginalised and those who have made some progress through the learning journey. It’s a real mix of young people, but we still have a responsibility to ensure the young person is right for the programme and that they are capable of completing the programme” (Personal Correspondence, Communications and Marketing Team, The Prince’s Trust)¹

3.2.2 Providing Young People with the Capabilities for Voice, Work and Education

Getting the recruitment right was seen as vital as there could be up to 300 applicants for 12 to 15 places. Recruitment could “*take the best part of two and half, three months*” (Project worker). Giving a place to a young person who then dropped out of the programme was seen as “*wasting everybody’s time*” (Head office manager). Programme staff described how young people needed to be suited to the way the programme is run, appreciate the opportunity that the programme offers and have a genuine interest in the sector that the programme they were applying to join focused on (e.g. be interested in working in retailing). Young people needed to be able to be challenged, be enthusiastic and determined, and be willing and committed to the programme.

“They have to be right for it, in terms of they have to be willing and committed to work and training and what we’re offering” (Head office manager)

A genuine interest can be hard to gauge (hence the need for a multistage process) as young people may be saying that they want to work in a sector that they might not necessarily be interested in because they do not want to compromise the chance of getting on a programme that may help them get a job. As such the economic climate of rising youth unemployment can be seen as compromising young people’s abilities to make the choice to engage in work that they value and also fear of not being allowed on the programme may restrict their voice to say what they actually value.

As well demonstrating that they were suited to the programme and sector and had a genuine interest in the sector, as with *Barnardo’s Works*, young people also needed to be ‘ready’ for

¹ Did not participate in the interviews

the programme. The programmes ranged in length from five to ten weeks and the staff participants outlined that the young people had to be in a position where the programme would make a positive difference. They did not want to set the young people up to fail and wanted to give places to young people who would benefit the most from the programme as it could *“make a massive difference in the 5 weeks”* (Project worker). However, the barriers experienced by the young people could compromise their readiness as it was not always possible to deal with deep-rooted issues in a few weeks. *“This means that it is essential that the [programme organisation – Prince’s Trust] work in partnership with other specialist organisations to signpost young people to the right places to get help...Sometimes we need to look at the wider available services and help young people to access those”* (Personal Correspondence, Communications and Marketing Team, The Prince’s Trust)².

It was sometimes difficult identify the conversion factors that the young people lacked. The project workers were not necessarily given detailed information about the young people by the agencies that referred the young person to the programme. Additionally the young people themselves were also not always willing to disclose barriers to the project workers, as they did not want to compromise their chances of getting on the programme. The intensive recruitment procedure employed by the organisation was to ensure that dropouts were kept to a minimum, however, there were occasions where young people did leave the programme. ‘Failure’ in the programme was attributed to a number of factors including family breakdown, homelessness, lack of motivation, bad timekeeping, not being able to adjust to working environment and a lack of family support. Where possible the project workers would try and help the young people address these issues by referring them to other relevant agencies or giving them more support, but at the same time they also expressed frustration at not being able to help the young people.

“So it can be a bit depressing because you really, really want them to do well and you are giving them all of the support that you can and sometimes you just can’t do enough...sometimes it’s just beyond your control and you just have to sort of tell yourself at least you have given them the opportunity and some people will need second, third and fourth and fifth chances until they get it right” (Project worker)

This also illustrates that some young people will need considerable time and several attempts before they are in a position to develop their resources and convert them into valued functionings.

3.2.3 The Capability for Voice, Work and Education

Get Into supports young people, by providing them with skills and experience to find a job, rather than giving them a job. As such the programme aims to set young people up for the future by providing them with the skills to find long term employment, rather than the immediate outcome of a short term job that is not sustained: *“ [what] we’re trying to help them to do is help them build careers rather than get jobs and hopefully they realise that”* (Project worker)

The programme also provides support and encouragement to the young people. As highlighted earlier, the young people had not always received encouragement or guidance before, with one project worker commenting that: *“quite often the feedback that I will get is*

² Did not participate in the interviews

nobody told me I could do that, nobody had said to me before” (Project worker). This encouragement is vital in developing the horizons of the young people, making them aware of what they could achieve if they had the support and motivation and empowering them to make informed choices and so having the capability to convert their existing resources into valued functionings (as well as develop their individual capabilities and resources).

“Getting that motivation, getting the self belief back, showing them what it’s like to do something as well and giving them that purpose. You know it’s not just about sitting about, people do believe in you and, you know, go and do this” (Project worker)

As well as broadening the young people’s horizons the programme helps to change other behaviours and attitudes in order to achieve future sustainable employment. For many of the young people being on the programme is their first experience of work: *“for some of them it might be their first job, so knowing exactly how to behave”* (Project worker). The young people develop a range of work related individual capabilities/functionings: e.g. professionalism, time keeping, teamwork, how to learn and move on from mistakes made in the workplace. The programme also aims to help young people understand the value of work and to have realistic expectations of work.

“It’s about the enjoyment they get out of actually being in a job and feeling like they’re doing something worthwhile and feeling part of something instead of sitting at home” (Project worker)

This is particularly relevant as the young people may experience a drop in income as they make the transition from (welfare) benefits to wages, so there is no financial gain (in the short term) from finding paid employment. The programme therefore seeks to encourage feelings of the enjoyment of working and the future career progress that the initial job may help lead to.

4 Analytical Review

This section presents an analytical review of the empirical findings from both case studies from a Capability Approach perspective. It presents a summary of the findings and the capabilities enhanced by the programmes before finally considering the limitations of the programmes from a capabilities perspective.

4.1 Capability for Voice (And Choice)

Questions need to be asked about the voice of young people as the findings demonstrate that young people’s aspirations can be limited because of the social contexts in which they live. The empirical data demonstrates that young people’s aspirations can be limited because of social contexts in which they live. At the start of the programmes the young people are often not equipped to have voice because of a lack of social skills, confidence and role models. Young people may not have considered what they wanted to do when they left school; they may not have had support and encouragement from family, friends and school; and they may lack social skills and confidence. Many young people may have very narrow horizons in terms of what type of employment they aspire to, shaped by gender stereotypes and a lack of role models.

Barnardo’s Works especially seeks to open up new ideas and possibilities to the young people on their programme by giving them choice. As such the programme supports the young people to develop the capability to aspire by allowing them to make informed choices and

giving them voice in terms of selection of their placement experience. In *Get Into* there is less emphasis on young people having the freedom to shape their programme experience because the programme is set up to provide experience in specific sectors. However, by providing experience of the sector the programme does enable young people to make future choices as the experience allows them to decide whether they enjoy working in a particular sector. So the programmes are helping, to some degree, young people to have voice and voicing what they want to learn and get out of the programme. Both programmes also provide the young people with more generic skills and knowledge to find other jobs such as writing CVs, job search techniques and interview skills.

Enabling unemployed youth to have voice and choice in the selection of placements etc. cannot be achieved without taking into account the importance of the external context of: local labour market conditions, the willingness of individual employers to participate in the programmes, funding issues and the wider policy environment etc. The staff participants cited that there are limitations to the choices that the young people have in terms of their employment options. A lack of positions in manual occupations was commonly cited by programme staff in *Barnardo's Works*; and *Get Into* in the main only provided experience in sectors where there were the most opportunities for future employment. More generally the young people who the programmes work with do not have unlimited choice because of a lack of qualification, experience and skills. So while young people's voice and choices may be developed through providing role models and encouragement; the extent to which they can articulate their voice and choice is still shaped and restrained by the context of wider labour markets, notably where UK youth unemployment rates are currently far higher than other age cohorts, often negative attitudes of employers towards low skilled young people and by the skills and experience of the young people themselves.

Although the primary aim of both programmes is to get young people into work, they do not have a sole focus on 'work-first' employment activation, rather by including a focus on promoting the individual capabilities of disadvantaged, unemployed youth they aim to give young people the opportunity to choose the work that they have reason to value. They recognise that addressing youth unemployment is more than placing them in work; it is also about providing sustainable employment that the young people themselves value. It is in this context that both programmes enable young people to make informed choices and have voice about what they would like to do and take ownership of their experiences. Although both programmes differ from mainstream employability programmes by taking a more holistic approach to youth activation, there is less evidence that they involve young people fully in the development and implementation of the programme. However, this might partly be due to the short timescales they are in contact with each young person and constraints imposed by funders in terms of what they can and cannot do in the programme.

4.2 Capability for Work

One of the main focuses of both the programmes is to develop young people's individual conversion factors³. The programmes acknowledge that simply providing placements/experience will not necessarily enable disadvantaged young people to sustain employment in the future. Rather unemployment cannot be taken in isolation from issues such as housing and health. Therefore core to the approach taken by the programmes is not only

³ In both programmes young people must possess some essential attributes e.g. willingness to work, social skills and responsibility; although these can also be developed through the programmes to a certain extent.

achieving hard outcomes such as experience, employment and qualifications, but also addressing those soft outcomes/capabilities such as confidence, self-belief and resilience, as well as helping to address housing and health issues etc., which were seen as important for ensuring future sustainable employment.

The programmes also acknowledge the importance of the support from young people's social networks (family and peers) in the shaping whether young people are likely to succeed on the programmes. The young people themselves cite the importance of family and peer support. Often one of the barriers that the young people presented with was this lack of encouragement. As such the programmes acknowledge the important influences of family, friends and the local community on the decisions and behaviour of young people. This approach takes the stance that focusing solely on the job outcome fails to take account of the process that leads to that functioning. Indeed, the project workers outlined on a number of occasions where family and friends can have both a positive and negative impact on the outcome of a young person participating in the programme

In terms of young people having the capability for work it is not only the individual conversion factors outlined above that play a role, but also on the broader social, economic, environmental and political context in which they are made. As was previously outlined there are limitations to the choices that the young people have in terms of their employment options and as such the young people often have to have adaptive preferences or make 'realistic' choices. Despite this, to a certain extent, the programmes also address external conversion factors when developing young people's capability for work. The external labour market can be seen as playing a crucial role in understanding the nature and extend of youth unemployment more generally. In the case of the UK, a lack of jobs growth, cutbacks in recruitment by employers and cuts in public sector employment mean that even when young people have the capabilities for work there are limited opportunities for work open to them. This lack of choice and opportunity in the labour market can have a detrimental impact on young people's ability to enter and progress in the labour market.

While the programmes have to operate within, and are restricted by, the context of the wider labour market (thus constraining the capability for voice and choice); they also seek to address some of the barriers that young people may face in the labour market by providing access to local employers. Prior to the programme the young people would not necessarily reach the interview stage of the job application process because of their lack of qualifications and/or experience. Therefore employers engaged with the programmes are being asked to provide placements/experience to applicants they would not previously have considered. As such it can be argued that some of the employers' preconceptions about disadvantaged youth as potential employees are being changed. Also as the young people in both programmes do not cost the employer the normal wage, they both encourage employers to give the young people the opportunity to show that they would be useful employees, and some young people are kept on in employment with their employer. However, during the time with the employer it is likely that few young people would feel that they could give full voice to some of their concerns about the job.

The programmes also provide young people with experience and skills to add to their (often previously short) CVs and develop their aspirations in terms of what work they want to do now and in the future. There is therefore an element of giving young people future choices as they are getting experience and some of the young people are seeing this first job as a stepping stone to something they aspire to. The idea of a 'career perspective' might be

relevant here as the programmes are enabling young people to build up a trajectory. Both programmes provided the young people with the generic skills to find new jobs, such as how to write job applications and CVs as well as interview skills and how to search for jobs. In addition both programmes stated that they aimed to give the young people the self-sufficiency and confidence to progress in the job market or to find new jobs if they are made redundant. Both programmes reported young people coming back to them for advice when they had lost a job. What was less clear was the extent to which the programmes set the young people up with the skills to build a career and progress in the labour market. The focus was on entry level positions in the labour market and teaching them the skills and behaviours for those types of job. It was perhaps out with the scope and capacity of the organisations to provide this support and advice for longer-term career progression and sustainability, particularly as they are relatively short-term programmes.

The empirical findings provide some important insights into what work young people have reason to value. Young people are able to reflect on what work 'is' in terms of learning what employers expect of them, how to behave at work, and how to deal with issues in the workplace. Educating young people about how to behave at work, such as good time-keeping and attendance, getting along with colleagues and taking responsibility, were seen as very important to their success in the programmes. When young people failed to achieve these work place behaviours this could potentially lead to them being excluded from the programme. What was less clear was the extent to which young people were educated about their rights at work, for example what employers can and cannot do, that they have a right to a voice in the workplace. However, both organisations emphasised that the employers were carefully chosen to ensure that they would treat the young people correctly and not exploit them. Working with vulnerable young people, who often lacked any significant experience of paid employment, the programmes wanted to find placements that would nurture and support the young people rather than putting them into an environment that could be potentially harmful.

Young people are also enabled to reflect on what work they are 'able to do' through, for example, being given a choice in *Barnardo's Works* of the placements they might want to undertake, as well as having their horizons broadened in terms of the job opportunities available to them. Another dimension in terms of what work young people have reason to value is what the young people's narratives reveal about what they enjoyed most about their placements. The friendliness of colleagues was commonly cited rather than the job role itself. Staff participants also highlighted that because of the economic climate young people just wanted 'any' job, therefore not necessarily reflecting on sectors, conditions etc.

4.3 Capability for Education

The ability to exercise freedom may be dependent on the education a young person has received. The young people of concern in the case study often had negative experiences of school and may not have taken up career advice opportunities, or have been offered them. Many of the young people felt the education system had failed them and left school with few, or no, qualifications and/or left school early. Project workers reported that the education system was not adequately equipped to deal with the many problems faced by such disadvantaged young people and there was too much focus on academic achievement. The programmes in the UK case study support disadvantaged young people who would not have the skills, experience or qualifications to find employment that they have reason to value without some support. As such the capability for voice and work are inextricably linked with

the capability for education. From the perspective of the UK case study we see education as encompassing two issues: education in terms of understanding what work is and education in terms of acquiring job or career specific skills and qualifications – both of which the young people in our case studies were lacking. Both the programmes focused getting young people into work rather than further education, however, this does not mean that education was not valued as many of the young people gained qualifications as part of their work placements and many went on to do further education combined with work, or as full-time students.

For many of the young people being on the programme is their first experience of work and they may also be from families where there may be generations of worklessness so they lack role models and sources of information about the workplace and also about accessing education and training more generally. The programmes therefore help the young people develop a range of work related individual capabilities/functionings: e.g. professionalism, time keeping, team work, how to learn and move on from mistakes made in the workplace, understanding the norms of the workplace, what employers will expect from them as an employee and which might also be useful if they participated in additional education. A relatively negative experience of low skilled work might also encourage some to realise the need for education in order to achieve a better career or job than they now perceived to be available to them and so enter Further Education⁴.

Barnardo's Works provides young people with qualifications (albeit limited qualifications given the time available). As some of the young people may never have previously got any qualifications or valued qualifications, this can be very important in developing their sense of achievement. Acquiring qualifications was also important in helping to ensure that young people would find it easier to find work in the future. One young person commented on how he saw his qualification as providing a stepping-stone to better paid employment in the future. *Get Into* also gives young people skills, qualifications, training and experience in order to enable them to work in particular sectors. The programme provides young people with skills that would make them stand out from other job applicants, e.g. knowing the terminology used in the sector, understanding the wider context of the sector. As mentioned above, many of the young people intended to continue to gain further qualifications as part of their job or as a full-time student.

4.4 Limitations of the Programmes

There are, however, some limitations in the programmes from a capabilities perspective. Both programmes have limited influence over external conversion factors e.g. weak local labour markets, vacancy characteristics and recruitment factors. These shape the directions taken by the programmes and the opportunities they can offer to the young people. The extent to which the programmes can directly address internal conversion factors is limited. The programmes are relatively short and therefore it may be difficult to address some of the deep-rooted barriers faced by the young people.

⁴ Some 374 young people participated in Barnardo's Works between July 2007 and June 2010, with half of the young people who started the programme successfully moving on from the programme after 26 weeks - 46% (171) into employment (including apprenticeships) and a further 4% (14 young people) into Further Education. Almost all young people (98%) that participate in the programme achieve some form of accreditation (McQuaid et al., 2011 and see also www.fsb.org.uk/021/assets/da/barnardos_works_info.pdf).

Although both programmes differ from many mainstream employability programmes by taking a more holistic approach to youth activation, there was less evidence that they involved young people fully in the development and implementation of the programme. However, this might be due to the short timescales they are in contact with each young person and constraints imposed by funders in terms of what they can and cannot do in the programme.

Both programmes were highly reliant on external funding sources (such as EU or government funding etc.), which put a number of constraints on their ability make long-term plans for the programmes. Although both programmes were successful, and benefited from being operated by large Third sector organisations, they still faced uncertainty due to wider context of public spending cuts and other cuts in funding in the UK. In addition changes to UK welfare system and the introduction of the government's Work Programme for long-term unemployed were seen as having potential impacts in how the programmes may operate in the future.

5 Conclusions

The UK case study has examined two, Third sector run, programmes that support disadvantaged young people making the transition from unemployment to employment from the perspectives of those managing the programmes, the project workers and the young people themselves.

The empirical findings have demonstrated that both programmes partly move away from 'work-first' employment activation, focusing instead on promoting the individual capabilities of disadvantaged, unemployed youth to choose the work that they have reason to value. Questions are raised about the voice (e.g. ability to effectively express their own opinions) of young people as the findings demonstrated that young people's aspirations can be limited because of the social contexts in which they live. It is in this context that both programmes enable young people to make informed choices about what they would like to do by providing, for example, insights into the realities of certain occupations or sectors, role models and encouragement. Young people are encouraged to take ownership of their experiences on the programmes. As such the programmes take the approach that the more you can give voice and choice to the young people the more successful the programme is likely to be.

The findings provide useful insights into what work young people potentially find reason to value, although it is recognised that such work should be viewed very much in the context of the types of jobs the young people were able to access. For many of young people we talked, having *any* work was seen as being valuable, even it was entry level and poorly paid. Enabling unemployed youth to choose the work that they have reason to value cannot be achieved without taking into account the importance of the external context; and so while young people's choices may be developed through providing role models etc. it is still a choice shaped and restrained by the context of wider labour markets and education and training opportunities (including the educational opportunities they had at school before they entered the labour market).

The programmes also engage with individual and external conversion factors by addressing wider personal, social and structural barriers that prevent young people from entering work. The programmes identify and develop positive capabilities (resilience, resourcefulness, commitment, motivation, self belief). While young people must possess some essential attributes, e.g. willingness to work, the programmes acknowledge that simply providing placements or experience will not necessarily enable disadvantaged young people to sustain

employment in the future. Rather young people's unemployment experiences are also linked to their housing, health and family relationships etc. This approach highlights the difference between outcomes and functionings; in particular that focusing solely on the job outcome fails to take account of the process that leads to that functioning. However, a lack of staff time can make it difficult to address deep-rooted barriers and the extent to which conversion factors can be addressed by the programmes.

In conclusion, it can be argued that the approach taken by the UK case studies appear to largely take a capabilities perspective on youth unemployment by framing unemployment in terms of impacts on wellbeing and quality of life. They take a 'capabilities-friendly' approach to employment activation by taking a holistic perspective, based on promoting individuals' freedom to choose the work and learning that they value; and acknowledging both individual and collective responsibilities to act to promote capabilities for work and learning (Bonvin & Farvaque 2007).

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